

Introduction to Genesis Chapter 1:1-2:3

In the beginning of everything

[NS] The story of Creation, or cosmology, that opens the Book of Genesis differs from all other such accounts that were current among the peoples of the ancient world. Its lack of interest in the realm of heaven and its economy of words in depicting primeval chaos are highly uncharacteristic of this genre of literature. The descriptions in Genesis deal solely with what lies beneath the celestial realm, and still the narration is marked by compactness, solemnity, and dignity.

There is abundant evidence that other cosmologies once existed in Israel. Scattered allusions to be found in the prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literature of the Bible testify to a popular belief that prior to the onset of the creative process the powers of watery chaos had to be subdued by God. These mythical beings are variously designated Yam (Sea), Nahar (River), Leviathan (Coiled One), Rahab (Arrogant One), and Tannin (Dragon). There is no consensus in these fragments regarding the ultimate fate of these creatures. One version has them utterly destroyed by God; in another, the chaotic forces, personalized as monsters, are put under restraint by His power.

These myths about a cosmic battle at the beginning of time appear in the Bible in fragmentary form, and the several allusions have to be pieced together to produce some kind of coherent unity. Still, the fact that these myths appear in literary compositions in ancient Israel indicates clearly that they had achieved wide currency over a long period of time. They have survived in the Bible solely as obscure, picturesque metaphors and exclusively in the language of poetry. *Never are these creatures accorded divine attributes, nor is there anywhere a suggestion that their struggle against God could in any way have posed a challenge to His sovereign rule.*

This is of particular significance in light of the fact that one of the inherent characteristics of all other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies is the internecine strife of the gods. Polytheistic accounts of creation always begin with the predominance of the divinized powers of nature and then describe in detail a titanic struggle between the opposing forces. They inevitably regard the achievement of world order as the outgrowth of an overwhelming exhibition of power on the part of one god who then manages to impose his will upon all other gods.

The early Israelite creation myths, with all their color and drama, must have been particularly attractive to the masses. But none became the regnant version. It was the austere account set forth in the first chapter of Genesis that won unrivaled authority. At first it could only have been the intellectual elite in ancient Israel, most likely the priestly and scholarly circles, who could have been capable of realizing and appreciating the compact forms of symbolization found in Genesis. It is they who would have cherished and nurtured this version until its symbols finally exerted a decisive impact upon the religious consciousness of the entire people of Israel.

The mystery of divine creativity is, of course, ultimately unknowable. The Genesis narrative does not seek to make intelligible what is beyond human ken. To draw upon human language to explain that which is outside any model of human experience is inevitably to confront the inescapable limitations of any attempt to give verbal expression to this subject.

For this reason alone, the narrative in its external form must reflect the time and place of its composition. Thus it directs us to take account of the characteristic modes of literary expression current in ancient Israel. It forces us to realize that a literalistic approach to the text must inevitably confuse idiom with idea, symbol with reality. The result would be to obscure the enduring meaning of that text.

The biblical Creation narrative is a document of faith. It is a quest for meaning and a statement of a religious position. It enunciates the fundamental postulates of the religion of Israel, the central ideas and concepts that animate the whole of biblical literature. Its quintessential teaching is that the universe is wholly the purposeful product of divine intelligence, that is, of the one self-sufficient, self-existing God, who is a transcendent Being outside of nature and who is sovereign over space and time.

This credo finds reiterated expression in the narrative in a number of ways, the first of which is the literary framework. The opening and closing lines epitomize the central idea: "God created." Then there is the literary structure, which presents the creative process with bilateral symmetry. The systematic progression from chaos to cosmos unfolds in an orderly and harmonious manner through a series of six successive and equal units of time. The series is divided into two parallel groups, each of which comprises four creative acts performed in three days. The third day in each group is distinguished by two productions. In each group the movement is from heaven to terrestrial water to dry land. Moreover, the arrangement is such that each creation in the first group furnishes the resource that is to be utilized by the corresponding creature in the second group. The chart below illustrates the schematization.

THE SIX DAYS OF CREATION

Group I , The Resource		Group II, The Utilizer	
Day	Creative Act	Day	Creative Act
1	Light	4	The luminaries
2	Sky, leaving terrestrial waters	5	Fish and fowl
3	Dry land	6	Land creatures
	Vegetation, (Lowest form of organic life)		Humankind, (Highest form of organic life)

The principle of order, deliberation, and direction is further inculcated by means of the progression from inorganic matter to the lowest forms of organic life to four categories of living creatures: fish and fowl, reptiles, the higher animals, and finally humankind. In addition, the entire narrative adheres to a uniform literary pattern. Each of the literary units begins with a declaration formula, "God said," followed by a command, a statement recording its fulfillment, a notice of divine approbation, and a closing formula, "There was evening and there was morning," with the accompanying numbered day.

Finally, the Narrator employs the device of number symbolism, the heptad, to emphasize the basic idea of design, completion, and perfection. The opening proclamation contains seven words; the description of primal chaos is set forth in twice seven words; the narrative's seven literary units feature seven times the formula for the effectuation of the divine will and the statement of divine approval; and the six days of creation culminate in the climactic seventh.

This seven-day typology is widely attested in the ancient world. As early as the twenty-second century B.C.E., King Gudea of Lagash, in southern Mesopotamia, dedicated a temple with a seven-day feast. The literatures of Mesopotamia and Ugarit are replete with examples of seven-day units of time. Most common is a state of affairs that lasts for six days with a climactic change taking place on the seventh. While the Creation narrative conforms to this literary convention, it is unique in that a different action occurs each day, with no activity at all on the seventh.

[REF] The first portion of the Torah has a double role: it conveys its own story, and it sets the context of the entire Torah. The Torah's stories have been observed to be rich in background, as opposed to, for example, the epic poems of Homer. In Homer, each episode is self-contained: all the information that a reader needs is provided then and there, and all action is in the foreground.

That is fine, but it is not the way of the Torah. To read the Torah at any level beyond "Sunday school," one must have a sense of the whole when one reads the parts. To comprehend what happens in the exodus and in the revelation at Sinai, you have to know what has happened in Genesis 1. Like some films that begin with a sweeping shot that then narrows, so the first chapter of Genesis moves gradually from a picture of the skies and the earth down to the first man and woman. The story's focus will continue to narrow: from the universe to the earth to humankind to specific lands and peoples to a single family. (It will expand back out to nations in Exodus.) But the wider concern with skies and the entire earth that is established here in the first portion will remain.

When the story narrows to a singular divine relationship with Abraham, it will still be with the ultimate aim that this will be "a blessing to all the families of the earth." Every biblical scene will be laden—artistically, theologically, psychologically, spiritually—with all that has come before. So when we read later of a man and his son going up a mountain to perform a fearful sacrifice, that moment in the history of a family is set in a cosmic context of the creation of the universe and the nature of the relationship between the creator and humankind. You can read the account of the binding of Isaac without being aware of the account of the creation or the account of the covenant between God and Abraham, but you lose something. The something that you lose—depth—is one of the essential qualities of the Torah.

The first portion initiates the historical flow of the Torah (and of the entire Tanach). It establishes that this is to be a related, linear sequence of events through generations. That may seem so natural to us now that we find this point obvious and banal. But the texts of the Torah are the first texts on earth known to do this. The ancient world did not write history prior to these accounts. The Torah's accounts are the first human attempts to recount history. Whether one believes all or part or none of its history to be true is a separate matter. The literary point is that this had the effect of producing a text that was rich in background: every event carries the weight of everything that comes before it. And the historical point is that this was a new way to conceive of time and human destiny.

There is also a theological point: this was a new way to conceive of a God. The pagan deities were known through their functions in nature: The sun god, Shamash, was the sun. If one wanted to know essence of Shamash, the thing to do was to contemplate the sun. If you wanted know the essence of the grain deity Dagon, you contemplated wheat.

But the God of the Torah was different, creating all of nature and therefore not knowable or identifiable through any one element of nature. One could learn no more about this God by contemplating the sea than by contemplating grain, sky, or anything else. The essence of this God remains hidden. One knows God by the divine acts in history. One never finds out what God is, but rather what God does—and what God says. This conception, which informs all of biblical narrative, did not necessarily have to be developed at the very beginning of the story, but it was. Parashat B'reshit establishes this by beginning with accounts of creation and by then flowing through the first 10 generations of humankind. (Those "begat" lists are more important than people generally think.)

The Torah's theology is thus inseparable from its history and from its literary qualities. Ultimately, there is no such thing as "The Bible as Literature" or "The Bible as History" or "The Bible as . . . anything." There is: the Bible.

[WGP] Beginning with the first sentence of Genesis, the existence of God is taken for granted. To the ancients, God was Parent, Friend, Sovereign, rather than an abstract force, principle, or process. Individuality was the highest expression of creation, and thus God the Creator could be spoken of only in such terms. It would not have occurred to the ancients to speak of God in any way other than the way one speaks of humans (who were created in the divine image), and it was therefore most natural to think of God as speaking, seeing, regretting, and occasionally as walking or descending. The divinity and majesty of the Deity were thereby not diminished. For instance, the expression “God said to Abraham” was the natural and even best method of recording a vital experience. As the Rabbis taught: “The Torah speaks in the language of [ordinary] people.” Only much later did these human ascriptions of God (called anthropomorphisms) begin to create the kind of serious problems that are being experienced by the modern Bible reader.

However one interprets the nature of God—as person or as process, as individual reality or generalized principle—there are three basic ideas that the contemporary reader can share with biblical perceptions and that are implicit in Genesis:

- That God, as Creative Force, provides all creation with purpose and that therefore to understand God means to understand one’s own potential;
- That God, as Lawgiver, validates the principles of justice and righteousness that must govern human affairs;
- That God, as Redeemer, guarantees the ultimate goals of existence and enables us to find meaning in our life.

Added to these is a pervasive theme that above all has made the Bible, the Tanach, from Genesis through Chronicles, a Jewish book—that through Abraham and Sarah and their descendants the realization of God’s plan for humanity will be hastened and, in fact, be made possible altogether.

The Rabbis said that God, the Master Architect, had a master plan of creation: The Torah, which provided that God’s world would exist for all purposes bound up with the creation of humanity. Humanity is placed on the stage of creation after all else has been formed and is represented as the crown of God’s labors. In anticipation, the text shifts into a slower gear; the words “God said” are not, as previously, directly followed by a creative act but by a further resolve, almost contemplative in nature: “Let us make human beings.”

The creature called human [*adam* means human, not the gender-specific “man”] is formed in God’s likeness. These words reflect the Torah’s abiding wonder over our special stature in Creation, over our unique intellectual capacity, which bears the imprint of the Creator. This likeness also describes our moral potential. Our nature is radically different from God’s, but we are capable of approaching God’s actions: divine love, divine mercy, divine justice. We become truly human as we attempt to do godly deeds. “As God is merciful,” said the Rabbis, “so shall you be merciful; as God is just, so shall you be just.”

Our likeness to the Divine has a third and most important meaning: It stresses the essential holiness and, by implication, the dignity of all humanity, without any distinctions. “Above all demarcations of races and nations, castes and classes, oppressors and servants, givers and recipients, above all delineations even of gifts and talents stands one certainty: the human being,” says Leo Baeck. “Whoever bears this image is created and called to be a revelation of human dignity.”

Six times the text says that God found the Creation “good”; after humankind was created it was found “very good.” Being is better than nothingness, order superior to chaos, and human existence—with all its difficulties—a blessing. But Creation is never called perfect; it will, in fact, be our task to assist the Creator in perfecting Creation, to become the Eternal’s co-worker.

Genesis Chapter 1:1-2:3—Translations and Commentary

1. In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth [In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth—OJPS]

2. the earth was *tohu* and *vohu* [unformed and void—OJPS; wild and waste—EF; welter and waste—RA; shapeless and formless—REF], and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

[NS] 1. When God began to create We have here a momentous assertion about the nature of God: that He is wholly outside of time, just as He is outside of space, both of which He proceeds to create. In other words, for the first time in the religious history of the Near East, God is conceived as being entirely free of temporal and spatial dimensions.

God The term for God used here and throughout Chapter 1 is '*elohim*'. This is not a personal name but the general Hebrew word for deity. It can even refer to pagan gods. The preference for the use of '*elohim*' in this chapter, rather than the sacred divine name YHWH, connotes universalism and abstraction, and thus is most appropriate for the transcendent God of Creation.

create The Hebrew stem *b-r-'* is used in the Bible exclusively of divine creativity. It signifies that the product is absolutely novel and unexampled, depends solely on God for its coming into existence, and is beyond the human capacity to reproduce.

heaven and earth The definite article in the Hebrew specifies the observable universe. The use here of a merism, the combination of opposites, expresses the totality of cosmic phenomena, for which there is no single word in biblical Hebrew. The subsequent usage of each term separately refers to the sky and the dry land in the more restricted and concrete sense.

[REF] 1:1. In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth. The translation of the Torah's first phrase is a classic problem. Even at the risk of a slightly awkward English, I have translated it literally, not only to make it reflect the Hebrew, but to show the significant parallel between this opening and the opening of the second picture of creation in Genesis 2:4, thus:

In the beginning of	God's	creating	the skies and the earth
In the day of	YHWH God's	making	earth and skies

The second line is translated slightly differently above because it is not possible to reproduce the doubled divine identification, YHWH God, with a possessive in English. Note that this first, universal conception puts the skies first, while the second, more earthly account starts with earth.

[REF] 1:2. the earth had been. Here is a case in which a tiny point of grammar makes a difference for theology. In the Hebrew of this verse, the noun comes before the verb (in the perfect form). This is now known to be the way of conveying the past perfect in Biblical Hebrew. This point of grammar means that this verse does not mean "the earth was shapeless and formless"—referring to the condition of the earth starting the instant after it was created. This verse rather means that "the earth had been shapeless and formless"—that is, it had already existed in this shapeless condition prior to the creation. Creation of matter in the Torah is not out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), as many have claimed. And the Torah is not claiming to be telling events from the beginning of time.

[RA] 2. welter and waste. The Hebrew *tohu vavohu* occurs only here and in two later biblical texts that are clearly alluding to this one. The second word of the pair looks like a nonce term coined to rhyme with the first and to reinforce it, an effect I have tried to approximate in English by alliteration. *Tohu* by itself means "emptiness" or "futility," and in some contexts is associated with the trackless vacancy of the desert.

Guide to the Translators and Commentators used here

EF: Everett Fox **REF:** Richard Elliott Friedman **RA:** Robert Alter **NS:** Nahum Sarna **CS:** Chaim Stern
SRH: Samson Raphael Hirsch **RASHI:** Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak **OJPS:** Old Jewish Publication Society version
WGP: W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* ⁵ **TWC:** *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

3. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

4. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

[NS] 3. God said "God said" means "God thought" or "God willed." It signifies that the Creator is wholly independent of His creation. It implies effortlessness and absolute sovereignty over nature.

Let there be The directive *y'hi*, found again in verses 6 and 14, is reserved for the creation of celestial phenomena.

and there was light God's commanding utterance possesses the inherent power of self-realization and is unchallengeable. The sevenfold repetition of the execution formula, "and there was," emphasizes the distinction between the tension, resistance, and strife that are characteristic of ancient Near Eastern cosmologies and the fullness of divine power that we find here.

[REF] 3. Let there be light. God creates light simply by saying the words: "Let there be" (the Hebrew jussive [a word, form, case, or mood expressing command]). Only light is expressly created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). All other elements of creation may possibly be formed out of pre-existing matter, that is, from the initially undifferentiated chaos. Thus God later says, "Let there be a space," but the text then adds, "And God made the space." And God says, "Let there be sources of light," but the text adds, "And God made the sources of light." So we cannot understand these things to be formed simply by the words "Let there be." Now we can appreciate the importance of understanding the Torah's first words correctly: The Torah does not claim to report everything that has occurred since the beginning of space and time. It does not say, "In the beginning, God created the skies and the earth." It rather says, "In the beginning of God's creating the skies and the earth, when the earth had been shapeless and formless...." That is, there is pre-existing matter, which is in a state of watery chaos. Subsequent matter—dry land, heavenly bodies, plants, animals—may be formed out of this undifferentiated fluid. In Greece, the first philosopher, Thales, later proposed such a concept, that all things derive from water. Examples from other cultures could be cited as well. There appears to be an essential human feeling that everything derives originally from water, which is hardly surprising given that we—and all life on this planet—did in fact proceed from water.

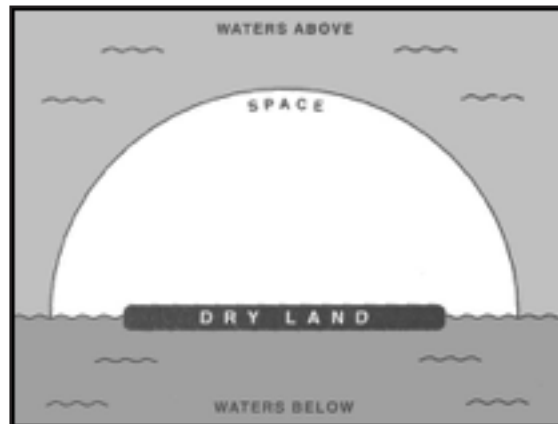
[NS] 4. God saw Not visual examination but perception. The formula of divine approbation, "God saw that [it] was good," affirms the consummate perfection of God's creation, an idea that has important consequences for the religion of Israel. Reality is imbued with God's goodness. The pagan notion of inherent, primordial evil is banished. Henceforth, evil is to be apprehended on the moral and not the mythological plane.

5. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day [first day—RA].

6. And God said, "Let there be a dome [firmament—OJPS; vault—RA; space—REF] in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters."

[RA] 5. one day. Unusually, the Hebrew uses a cardinal, not ordinal, number. As with all the six days except the sixth, the expected definite article is omitted.

[REF] 6. space. The distinction between "the water that was under the space and the water that was above the space" is particularly important and was frequently confusing to readers who were not certain of the meaning of the old term for this space: "firmament." As Rashi perceived, the text pictures a territory formed in the middle of the watery chaos, a giant bubble of air surrounded on all sides by water. Once the land is created, the universe as pictured in Genesis is a habitable bubble, with land and seas at its base, surrounded by a mass of water. Like this:



God calls the space "skies" "The skies" (or "heavens") here refer simply to space, to the sky that we see, not to some other, unseen place where God dwells or where people dwell after their death. The reference to "water that was above the space" presumably reflects the fact that when the ancients looked at the sky they understood from its blue color that there was water up there above the air. As when we look out at the horizon on a clear day and can barely distinguish where the blue sea ends and the blue sky begins, so they pictured the earth as surrounded by water above and below. The space was the invisible substance that holds the upper waters back. It is important to appreciate this picture of the cosmos with which the Torah begins or one cannot understand other matters that come later, especially the story of the flood.

6. Let there be a space. The "firmament" is either the entire air space or, more probably, just the transparent edge of the space, like a glass dome (Ramban, Nachmanides, says "like a tent"), which is actually up against the water. It is difficult to say which. The Hebrew root of the word, *raki'a*, refers to the way in which a goldsmith hammers gold leaf very thin. This may suggest that the firmament is best understood to be the thin outermost layer of the air space. Still, we must be cautious not to automatically derive the meaning of a word from its root. People commonly make this mistake because the Hebrew of the Tanach is so beautifully constructed around three-letter roots. Looking for root meanings is usually very helpful. But sometimes it can lead to misunderstandings. Words can evolve away from their root meanings over centuries.

7. So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so.

8. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning [there was setting and there was dawning—EF], Day Two.

9. And God said, "Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so.

10. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together He called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

11. Then God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." And it was so.

[NS] 7. God made This verb *'s-h*, used again in verses 16 and 25, simply means that the divine intention became a reality. It does not represent a tradition of creation by deed as opposed to word. This is clear from a passage like Psalms 33:6, which features God's creative word and deed with no perceptible difference between them: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made (Heb. *na'asu*) / by the breath of His mouth, all their host." In the same way, several texts indiscriminately interchange "create" (*b-r-*) and "make" (*'s-h*), with God as the actor.

and it was so Henceforth this is the standard formula for expressing the execution of the divine command. It was only the brevity of God's initial utterance in verse 3 that permitted repetition of its content without stylistic clumsiness. The formula *ki tov*, "that it was good," is omitted because rain has no value unless there is dry land to be fructified; the creative acts relating to water are not completed until the third day, the account of which appropriately records the formula twice.

[REF] 8. a second day. The first day's account concludes with the cardinal number: "one day." All of the following accounts conclude with ordinal numbers: "a second day," "a third day," and so on. This sets off the first day more blatantly as something special in itself rather than merely the first step in an order. It may be because the first day's creation—light—is qualitatively different from all other things. Or it may be because the opening day involves the birth of creation itself. Or it may be that the first unit involves the creation of a day as an entity.

9. The two acts of this day are interconnected, the first being the prerequisite of the second. below the sky That is, the terrestrial waters. the dry land The terrain now visible to man.

11. Let the earth sprout This creative act constitutes an exception to the norm that God's word directly effectuates the desired product. Here the earth is depicted as the mediating element, implying that God endows it with generative powers that He now activates by His utterance. The significance of this singularity is that the sources of power in what we call nature, which were personified and deified in the ancient world, are now emptied of sanctity. The productive forces of nature exist only by the will of one sovereign Creator and are not independent spiritual entities. There is no room in such a concept for the fertility cults that were features of ancient Near Eastern religions.

vegetation Hebrew *deshe'* is the generic term, which is subdivided into plants and fruit trees. A similar botanical classification is found in Leviticus 27:30. The function of these productions is revealed in verses 29–30.

seed-bearing That is, endowed with the capacity for self-replication.

of every kind That is, the various species that collectively make up the genus called *deshe'*. That this is the meaning of Hebrew *l'mino* is clear from several texts.

12. The earth brought forth vegetation [grass—OJPS, RA; sprouting-growth—EF; plants—REF]: plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.

13. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Three [a third day—OJPS, REF]; third day—EF, RA].

14. And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,

15. and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” And it was so.

16. God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule by day and the lesser light to rule by night—and the stars.

[REF] 12. vegetation that produces seeds of its own kind. The fact that plants (and later, animals) not only reproduce but also propagate offspring like themselves, rather than random production of new lifeforms, is not taken for granted. It is treated as both fundamental and a wonder of life, which needed an explicit creative utterance by the deity.

13. third day. On the third day the divine attention turns from the cosmos to the world: first land, then the vegetation that the land yields. On the fourth day the attention turns back to the skies: the creation of lights in the sky. The alternation between skies and earth continues as the deity turns back to the earth on the fifth day. This conveys that the earth and the skies are not conceptually separate. Understanding the nature of the universe is essential to understanding our place as humans on earth. We have especially come to realize this through the discoveries in astronomy and physics of the last century.

[NS] 14. Let there be lights This pronouncement corresponds to verse 3, “Let there be light.” The emergence of vegetation prior to the existence of the sun, the studied anonymity of these luminaries, and the unusually detailed description have the common purpose of emphasizing that sun, moon, and stars are not divinities, as they were universally thought to be; rather, they are simply the creations of God, who assigned them the function of regulating the life rhythms of the universe. With regard to the particulars, apart from the alternating cycle of day and night, there is some uncertainty as to interpretation.

signs for the set times Hebrew *’otot* and *mo’adim* are here treated as hendiadys, a single thought expressed by two words. The “set times” are then specified as “the days and the years.” It is also possible to take *’otot* as the general term meaning “time determinant,” a gauge by which “fixed times” (*mo’adim*) such as new moons, festivals, and the like are determined, as well as the days and the years.

[REF] 15. they will be for lights in the space. Note that daylight is not understood here to derive from the sun. The text understands the light that surrounds us in the daytime to be an independent creation of God, which has already taken place on the first day. The sun, moon and stars are understood here to be light sources—like a lamp or torch, only stronger. Their purpose is also to be markers of time: days, years, appointed occasions

[NS] 15. to shine upon earth To focus their light downward, not upward upon heaven.

16. Here the general term “luminaries” is more precisely defined. Significantly, no particular role is assigned to the stars, which are not further discussed. This silence constitutes a tacit repudiation of astrology.

17. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth,
18. to rule by [have dominion over—RA; regulate—REF] day and by night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good.
19. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Four [a fourth day—OJPS, REF]; fourth day—EF, RA].
20. And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.”
21. So God created the great whales [sea-monsters—OJPS, RA; sea-serpents—EF, REF] and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good.
22. And God blessed them saying, “Be fruitful and increase [multiply—OJPS, RA, REF]; fill the waters in the seas and let the birds increase on the land.”
23. And there was evening and there was morning, Day Five [a fifth day—OJPS, REF]; fifth day—EF, RA].

[NS] 20. Let the waters bring forth swarms Water does not here possess inherent, independent generative powers as it does in the pagan mythologies. It produces marine life only in response to the divine command.

living creatures Hebrew *nefesh chayyah* means literally “animate life,” that which embodies the breath of life. It is distinct from plant life, which was not considered to be “living.” It is unclear why the formula “and it was so” is omitted here. It appears in the Septuagint version.

across the expanse of the sky Literally, “over the face of,” that is, from the viewpoint of an earth observer looking upward.

21. God created This is the first use of *bara’* after verse 1. Here it signifies that a new stage has been reached with the emergence of animate beings.

the great sea monsters This specification expresses an unspoken antipagan polemic. Hebrew *tannin* appears in Canaanite myths from Ugarit, together with Leviathan, as the name of a primeval dragon-god who assisted Yam (Sea) in an elemental battle against Baal, the god of fertility. Fragments of this myth, in a transformed Israelite version, surface in several biblical poetic texts in which the forces of evil in this world are figuratively identified with Tannin (Dragon), the embodiment of the chaos that the Lord vanquished in primeval time. By emphasizing that “God created the great sea monsters” late in the cosmogonic process, the narrative at once strips them of divinity.

[REF] 21. sea serpents. Hebrew *tannin*. This is generally understood to refer to some giant serpentlike creatures that were formed at creation but later destroyed, associated with the monsters Rahab (Isaiah 51.9) or Leviathan (Isaiah 27.1). Later, Aaron’s staff (and the Egyptian magicians’ staffs) turns into such a creature (not merely a snake!) at the Egyptian court.

[NS] 22. God blessed them Animate creation receives the gift of fertility. Plant life was not so blessed, both because it was thought to have been initially equipped with the capacity for self-reproduction by nonsexual means and because it is later to be cursed. The procreation of animate creatures, however, requires individual sexual activity, mating. This capacity for sexual reproduction is regarded as a divine blessing.

24. And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind." And it was so.

25. God made wild beasts of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth. And God saw that this was good.

26. Then God said, "Let us make *ha'adam* [man—OJPS; humankind—EF; human—RA. REF] in our image, according to our likeness; and they shall rule [have dominion—OJPS, EF; dominate—REF; hold sway—RA] over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

[NS] DAY SIX

The drama of Creation is moving toward its final act, the production of animate beings whose natural habitat is dry land. The unusual expansiveness of this section, the enhanced formula of approbation, and the exceptional use of the definite article with the day number indicate that the narrative is reaching its climax. The section is divided into two parts. Verses 24-25 describe the emergence of the animal kingdom, which is classified according to three categories: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts. The drama then culminates in verses 26-30 with the creation of the human being.

26. The second section of the sixth day culminates the creative process. A human being is the pinnacle of Creation. This unique status is communicated in a variety of ways, not least by the simple fact that humankind is last in a manifestly ascending, gradational order. The creation of human life is an exception to the rule of creation by divine fiat, as signaled by the replacement of the simple impersonal Hebrew command (the jussive) with a personal, strongly expressed resolve (the cohortative). The divine intent and purpose are solemnly declared in advance, and the stereotyped formula "and it was so" gives way to a thrice-repeated avowal that God created the man, using the significant verb *b-r-'*. Human beings are to enjoy a unique relationship to God, who communicates with them alone and who shares with them the custody and administration of the world.

At the same time, the pairing of the creation of man in this verse with that of land animals, and their sharing in common a vegetarian diet, focuses attention on the dual nature of humankind, the creatureliness and earthiness as well as the Godlike qualities.

The mysterious duality of man—the awesome power at his command and his stark and utter insignificance compared to God—is the subject of the psalmist who, basing himself on this narrative, exclaims: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, / the moon and stars that You set in place, / what is man that You have been mindful of him, / mortal man that You have taken note of him, / that You have made him little less than divine, / and adorned him with glory and majesty; / You have made him master over Your handiwork, / laying the world at his feet" (Pss. 8:4–7).

Let us make The extraordinary use of the first person plural evokes the image of a heavenly court in which God is surrounded by His angelic host. This is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized. It is noteworthy that this plural form of divine address is employed in Genesis on two other occasions, both involving the fate of humanity: in 3.22, in connection with the expulsion from Eden; and in 11.7, in reference to the dispersal of the human race after the building of the Tower of Babel.

man Hebrew *'adam* is a generic term for humankind; it never appears in Hebrew in the feminine or plural. In the first five chapters of Genesis it is only rarely a proper name, Adam.

The term encompasses both man and woman, as shown in verses 27-28 and 5.1-2, where it is construed with plural verbs and terminations.

in our image, after our likeness This unique combination of expressions, virtually identical in meaning, emphasizes the incomparable nature of human beings and their special relationship to God. The full import of these terms can be grasped only within the broader context of biblical literature and against the background of ancient Near Eastern analogues.

The continuation of verse 26 establishes an evident connection between resemblance to God and sovereignty over the earth's resources, though it is not made clear whether man has power over nature as a result of his being like God or whether that power constitutes the very essence of the similarity. A parallel passage in 9.6-7 tells of God's renewed blessing on the human race after the Flood and declares murder to be the consummate crime precisely because "in His image did God make man." In other words, the resemblance of man to God bespeaks the infinite worth of a human being and affirms the inviolability of the human person. The killing of any other creature, even wantonly, is not murder. Only a human being may be murdered. It would seem, then, that the phrase "in the image of God" conveys something about the nature of the human being as opposed to the animal kingdom; it also asserts human dominance over nature. But it is even more than this.

The words used here to convey these ideas can be better understood in the light of a phenomenon registered in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, whereby the ruling monarch is described as "the image" or "the likeness" of a god. In Mesopotamia we find the following salutations: "The father of my lord the king is the very image of Bel (salam bel) and the king, my lord, is the very image of Bel"; "The king, lord of the lands, is the image of Shamash"; "O king of the inhabited world, you are the image of Marduk." In Egypt the same concept is expressed through the name Tutankhamen (Tutankh-amun), which means "the living image of (the god) Amun," and in the designation of Thutmose IV as "the likeness of Re."

Without doubt, the terminology employed in Genesis 1.26 is derived from regal vocabulary, which serves to elevate the king above the ordinary run of men. In the Bible this idea has become democratized. All human beings are created "in the image of God"; each person bears the stamp of royalty. This was patently understood by the author of Psalm 8, cited above. His description of man in royal terms is his interpretation of the concept of the "image of God" introduced in verse 26. It should be further pointed out that in Assyrian royal steles, the gods are generally depicted by their symbols: Ashshur by the winged disk, Shamash by the sun disk, and so forth. These depictions are called: "the image (salam) of the great gods." In light of this, the characterization of man as "in the image of God" furnishes the added dimension of his being the symbol of God's presence on earth. While he is not divine, his very existence bears witness to the activity of God in the life of the world. This awareness inevitably entails an awesome responsibility and imposes a code of living that conforms with the consciousness of that fact.

It should be added that the pairing of the terms *tselem* and *demut*, "image" and "likeness," is paralleled in a ninth-century B.C.E. Assyrian-Aramaic bilingual inscription on a statue at Tell Fekheriyeh in Syria. The two terms are used interchangeably and indiscriminately and obviously cannot be used as criteria for source differentiation.

They shall rule The verbs used here and in verse 28 express the coercive power of the monarch, consonant with the explanation just given for "the image of God." This power, however, cannot include the license to exploit nature banefully, for the following reasons: the human race is not inherently sovereign, but enjoys its dominion solely by the grace of God. Furthermore, the model of kingship here presupposed is Israelite, according to which, the monarch does not possess unrestrained power and authority; the limits of his rule are carefully defined and circumscribed by divine law, so that kingship is to be exercised with responsibility and is subject to accountability. Moreover, man, the sovereign of nature, is conceived at this stage to be functioning within the context of a "very good" world in which the interrelationships of organisms with their environment and with each other are entirely harmonious and mutually beneficial, an idyllic situation that is

clearly illustrated in Isaiah's vision of the ideal future king (Isaiah 11.1-9). Thus, despite the power given him, man still requires special divine sanction to partake of the earth's vegetation, and although he "rules" the animal world, he is not here permitted to eat flesh (vv. 29-30; cf. 9.3-4).

There is one other aspect to the divine charge to man. Contrary to the common beliefs of the ancient world that the forces of nature are divinities that may hold the human race in thralldom, our text declares man to be a free agent who has the God-given power to control nature.

[REF] 26. Let us make. Why does God speak in the plural here? Some take the plural to be "the royal we" as used by royalty and the papacy among humans, but this alone does not account for the fact that it occurs only in the opening chapters of the Torah and nowhere else. Others take the plural to mean that God is addressing a heavenly court of angels, seraphim, or other heavenly creatures, although this, too, does not explain the limitation of the phenomenon to the opening chapters. More plausible, though by no means certain, is the suggestion that it is an Israelite, monotheistic reflection of the pagan language of the divine council. In pagan myth, the chief god, when formally speaking for the council of the gods, speaks in the plural. Such language might be appropriate for the opening chapters of the Torah, thus asserting that the God of Israel has taken over this role.

[RA] 26. a human. The term *'adam*, afterward consistently with a definite article (*ha*), which is used both here and in the second account of the origins of humankind, is a generic term for human beings, not a proper noun. It also does not automatically suggest maleness, especially not without the prefix *ben*, "son of," and so the traditional rendering "man" is misleading, and an exclusively male *'adam* would make nonsense of the last clause of verse 27.

hold sway. The verb *radah* is not the normal Hebrew verb for "rule" (the latter is reflected in "dominion" of verse 16), and in most of the contexts in which it occurs it seems to suggest an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery.

27. So God created *ha'adam* in his image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.

28. And God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and all the living things that creep on earth."

29. And God said: "Behold, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth, and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food.

30. And to all the land animals, and to the birds in the sky and to everything that creeps on the earth in which there is a breath of life, I give all the green plants for food." And it was so.

31. God saw everything that He had made, and indeed, it was very good [exceedingly good—EF]. And there was evening and there was morning, the Sixth Day.

[NS] 27. male and female He created them No such sexual differentiation is noted in regard to animals. Human sexuality is of a wholly different order from that of the beast. The next verse shows it to be a blessed gift of God woven into the fabric of life. As such, it cannot of itself be other than wholesome. By the same token, its abuse is treated in the Bible with particular severity. Its proper regulation is subsumed under the category of the holy, whereas sexual perversion is viewed with abhorrence as an affront to human dignity and as a desecration of the divine image in man.

The definition of the human community contained in this verse is solemnly repeated in 5.1-2, an indication of its seminal importance. Both sexes are created on the sixth day by the hand of the one God; both are made "in His image" on a level of absolute equality before Him. Thus the concept of humanity needs both male and female for its proper articulation.

28. God blessed them and God said to them The difference between the formulation here and God's blessing to the fish and fowl in verse 22 is subtle and meaningful. Here God directly addresses man and woman. The transcendent God of Creation transforms Himself into the immanent God, the personal God, who enters into unmediated communion with human beings.

[REF] 31. everything that He had made, and, here, it was very good. The initial state of creation is regarded as satisfactory. Things will soon go wrong, but it is unclear if that means that the "good" initial state becomes flawed, or if there is hope that the course of events will fit into an ultimately good structure in "the length of days." One of the most remarkable results of having a sense of the Tanach as a whole when one reads the parts is that one can experience the overwhelming irony of God's judging everything to be good in Genesis 1 when so much will go wrong later. Above all, the struggle between God and humans will recur and unfold powerfully and painfully. The day in which the humans are created is declared to be good, but this condition ends very soon. No biblical hero or heroine will be unequivocally perfect. Individuals and nations, Israel and all of humankind, will be pictured in conflict with the creator for the great majority of the text that will follow. Parashat Bereshit is a portent of this coming story; which is arguably the central story of the Tanach, because its first chapter contains the creation of humans that is divinely dubbed good, and its last verses contain the sad report that God regrets making the humans in the earth (6.6ff.). Importantly, Parashat Bereshit ends not with the deity's mournful statement that "I regret that I made them," (6.7) but rather with a point of hope: that Noah found favor in the divine sight (6.8) And this note, that there can be hope for humankind based on the acts of righteous individuals, is also a portent of the end of the story.

Genesis Chapter 2:1-3

1. The heaven and the earth were finished, and all their array [the host of them—OJPS].
2. On the seventh day God [*Elohim*] finished the work that He had been doing, and He ceased [rested—OJPS] on the seventh day from all the work that He had done.
3. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy [hallowed it—OJPS, EF, RA; made it holy—REF], because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had done.

Chapter 2: THE SEVENTH DAY (vv. 1–3)

The ascending order of Creation, and the “six-plus-one” literary pattern that determines the presentation of the narrative, dictates that the seventh day be the momentous climax. Man is indeed the pinnacle of Creation, but central to the cosmogonic drama is the work of God, the solo performer. The account of Creation opened with a statement about God; it will now close with a statement about God. The seventh day is the Lord’s Day, through which all the creativity of the preceding days achieves fulfillment. The threefold repetition of the day number indicates its paramount importance within the cosmic whole. The seventh day is in polar contrast to the other six days, which are filled with creative activity. Its distinctive character is the desistance from labor and its infusion with blessing and sanctity. This renders unnecessary the routine approbation formula. An integral part of the divinely ordained cosmic order, it cannot be abrogated by man. Its blessed and sacred character is a cosmic reality entirely independent of human effort.

The human institution of the Sabbath does not appear in the narrative. Indeed, the Hebrew noun *shabbat* is absent, and we have only the verbal forms of the root. There are several possible reasons for the omission. First, the expression “the seventh day” is required by the conventional, sequential style of the creation narrative in which numbered day follows numbered day in an ascending series. Further, the term *shabbat* connotes a fixed institution recurring with cyclic regularity. This would be inappropriate to the present context and, in general, inapplicable to God. Finally, as we read in Exodus 31.13, 16, and 17, the Sabbath is a distinctively Israelite ordinance, a token of the eternal covenant between God and Israel. Its enactment would be out of place before the arrival of Israel on the scene of history.

Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that the text provides the unspoken foundation for the future institution of the Sabbath. Not only is the vocabulary of the present passage interwoven with other Pentateuchal references to the Sabbath, but the connection with Creation is made explicit in the first version of the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20:8–11. “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God....For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day...and hallowed it.” The biblical institution of the weekly Sabbath is unparalleled in the ancient world. In fact, the concept of a seven-day week is unique to Israel, as is also, so far, the seven-day cosmogonic tradition. Both these phenomena are extraordinary in light of the widespread use of a seven-day unit of time, both as a literary convention and as an aspect of cultic observance in the ancient Near East. The wonderment is compounded by additional data. The other major units of time—day, month, and year—are uniformly based on the phases of the moon and the movement of the sun, and the calendars of the ancient world are rooted in the seasonal manifestations of nature. Remarkably, the Israelite week has no such linkage and is entirely independent of the movement of celestial bodies. The Sabbath thus underlines the fundamental idea of Israelite monotheism: that God is wholly outside of nature.

It is still a moot point whether the noun *shabbat* is derived from the verb *sh-b-t*, “to cease,” or vice versa. Attempts have been made to connect it with the Babylonian-Assyrian calendrical term *shapattu*, which is described as *ūm nūkh libbi*, “the day of the quieting of the heart (of the god),” that is, the day when he is appeased. This day, however, is defined as the fifteenth of the month, the day of the full moon. It is not certain that every full moon was called *shapattu*, nor is it clear how the term would have been transferred to the Israelite cyclical seventh day freed of any lunar association. The etymology and exact meaning of that term still remain problematical. In fact, the likelihood exists that *shapattu* is itself a loan word in Akkadian. In addition, there is no evidence that the day entailed a cessation from labor. Whatever its etymology, the biblical Sabbath as an institution is unparalleled in the ancient world.

[REF] 2. the seventh day. The seven-day week is found in cultures around the world, presumably because of the association with the sun, moon, and five planets that are visible to the naked eye. Hence, the English Sunday (Sun-day), Monday (Moon-day; cf. French *lundi*), and Saturday (Saturn-day), and French *mardi* (Mars-day) and *mercredi* (Mercury-day). It is fundamental to creation in the Torah, again relating the ordering of time to the very essence of creation. The reckoning of days and years is established by the creation of the sun and moon on the fourth day. The reckoning of weeks is established by the very order of divine activity in the creation itself. This may suggest that the week is given a special status among units of time, and this appears to be confirmed by the singular status given to the Sabbath. It is blessed by the creator, sanctified, and later will be recognized among the Ten Commandments.

ceased. The word (Hebrew *shavat*) means to “stop,” not to “rest” as it is often taken. The explicit association of the Sabbath with rest will come later, in the Ten Commandments.

3. made it holy. (Hebrew *kadesh*) This word is commonly understood to mean “separated,” in the sense of being set off from the usual, rather than denoting a special spiritual or even mysterious quality, but there really is little linguistic justification for that understanding. Holiness in the Torah seems indeed to be a singular, powerful quality that certain objects, places, and persons acquire.... It means much more than just “separate.”

What does it mean to make a day holy? The creation of humans toward the end of the account is both a climax and, at the same time, a small component of the universe. Their creation is not the culmination of the story. The culmination, as the story is arranged, is the Sabbath, a cosmic event: the deity at a halt and consummation. A. J. Heschel wrote that the special significance of the concept of the Sabbath is that it means the sanctification of time. Most other religious symbols are spatial: sacred objects, sacred places, sacred music, prayers, art, symbolic foods, gestures, and practices. But the first thing in the Torah to be rendered holy is a unit in the passage of time. This powerfully underscores the Torah’s character as containing the first known works of history. In consecrating the passage of time in weekly cycles, the institution of the Sabbath at the end of the creation account in Genesis 1 is itself a notable union of the cosmic/cyclical and the historical/linear flow of time. It sets all of the Bible’s coming accounts of history in a cosmic structure of time, just as the story of the creation of the universe in that chapter sets the rest of the Bible’s stories in a cosmic structure of space. Thus Genesis 1 is a story of the fashioning of a great orderly universe out of chaos in which everything fits into an organized temporal and spatial structure.